

A Company Commander's Thoughts on Iraq

by Captain John B. Nalls

This article shares some of my experiences in Iraq that will help prepare commanders and platoon leaders on what to expect and how to better prepare soldiers for the tasks ahead. These tasks are not covered by a supplement or manual, and are not a joy to learn in midst of a firefight. I know there are more than a hundred correct responses to every issue. These opinions are based on my experiences as a tank and headquarters company commander in an armor battalion preparing for and executing combat operations in a stability and support environment.

Before Deployment

Equip all of your soldiers, even the diehard “death before dismount” tanker noncommissioned officers, with either M4s or M16s. Also, the headquarters and headquarters company commander, the battalion commander, XO, S3, and staff will want M16s/M4s. An M9 makes a nice decoration, but is not worth spit in a firefight. The folks who think differently usually learn the hard way — after their first engagement. You do not want the “old man” to take his driver’s rifle during a raid, as I have seen happen.

Get dismount kits for your M240Bs. You will need crew served weapons; all you can muster. Determine ways to mount M240s and M2 .50 calibers on your trucks — all your trucks. Get the parts to turn your M1A1 tank version .50 cals into flexes — you will need the flexes in your trucks. I’m a nice guy, but when I go home, I’m taking my .50s with me, as my unit is M1A2SEP equipped, and the flex .50 is our baby. The good news is most of the up-armored high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) come with .50s. However, due to the limited number available for the task force, you will want crew served weapons on everything.

Train your drivers to drive with no lights — not even blackout markers. The noncompliant forces (NCF) will track your move-

ments by your blackout lights. They have plenty of rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) to launch. Do not be a target. Expect mounted patrols from a mismatch of different HMMWVs. The parade-ground, pretty-boy type will really hate what we are doing to trucks in Iraq, as they look like something out of a Mad Max movie. But nothing is worth the price of losing a soldier, if we know we can prevent it.

Prepare your HMMWVs at home station. Most of us have removed the doors from our trucks to increase our fields of fire when returning fire. Canvas doors offer no protection and only serve to reduce your fields of fire while on the move. Order Kevlar blankets and purchase infrared lights and mount them on trucks. Sandbag everything. Either fabricate or order mounts for crew served weapons for every HMMWV, take them to a range and have them fire stationary and on the move, both during daylight and darkness. Have the tank commander fire his M16 from a moving truck while seated.

While in Iraq, your convoy will get ambushed. I know all the range control geeks are going to have a heart attack when you make this suggestion. Any one of them is welcome to ride a patrol with me in Iraq. This is what we do, and what we should train. Experiencing an ambush for the first time is unpleasant, especially while a hail of RPG and small-arms fire rains down from multiple directions.

Train as many combat lifesavers (CLS) as you can. Order the correct number of CLS bags needed — not what is indicated on the MTOE. Several companies sell stocked CLS bags for about 25 dollars. Most of these companies accept government credit cards. The budget geek who tells you it is too expensive needs to be around when the frantic scramble for the CLS bag occurs. He would only have to witness it once in his career for him to get the point. Since there are no rear areas over here, he just might.

Train your soldiers — all of them, even the cooks, clerks, and command drivers, on dismounted operations. Teach dismount-



ed patrol, ambush, and counterambush techniques. Tankers, scouts, mortarmen, you will need to do this. Teach everyone how to react to ambushes — mounted and dismounted. You cannot take your tanks and personnel carriers everywhere.

Teach your soldiers how to clear houses. Set inner and outer cordons, and designate search teams to enter houses. Develop your techniques before you go to Iraq. Beat up your boss so you can train with tactical human intelligence teams and tactical psychological operations teams before you deploy. I know this will be difficult because most of these units are either Army Reserve or National Guard. These soldiers can keep crowds back with their speakers, and their translators will help you sort out good guys from bad guys. They can identify the difference between deeds to homes and instruction manuals for mortars. Unless you can read and write Arabic, you are just plain out of luck.

Train your first sergeants how to process detainees. Have military police and military intelligence soldiers teach you how to do the paperwork correctly, to include witness statements. If the paperwork is incomplete, really bad people end up getting released. Do not get frustrated if you have to redo a form. Getting the yardbird orchestrating attacks off the street is far more important to the lives of your soldiers than a little wounded pride over a screwed up form.

Get your mind right. You will be in firefights. Your tankers will dismount. Mentally prepare your families and your soldiers for

what lies ahead. Commander, you will take casualties. Make sure your supply sergeant knows how to inventory and ship personal effects. Ensure your soldiers' deployment readiness is tight, to include NCOs getting involved with soldiers' finances. If one of your soldiers is having marriage difficulties now, you can bet they are not going to get any better during a yearlong deployment.

Prepare your soldiers to deal with wounded and dead Americans and Iraqis. You will see and treat them. Tell your medics up front they cannot save every life — people will die. An intravenous infusion and a few bandages will not save a man whose lungs are shredded by a 5.56 round, even if the guy was shot on the operating table at the combat support hospital.

Tell family support groups what to expect. Do not sugarcoat the message. If you do, spouses will think they have been lied to, and you will lose their trust. Tell the spouses the truth; hold back nothing. For example, Specialist Jones cannot come home because granddad passed away, the family has financial problems, or the first baby is born. Ensure your soldier's family members know how to contact the American Red Cross in the event of a family disaster. Your family support group leader must be willing to contact family members for all your soldiers, not just the married ones. Know your soldiers' family support group contact and keep the rosters tight. Mom and Dad want to know how Johnnie is doing just as badly as a husband, wife, or fiancé. Get accurate contact information from spouses who return home for the deployment duration.

While In Iraq: What to Expect and a Couple of Recommendations

Not all of Iraq is a big desert. The river valleys are loaded with date palm groves, vineyards, and sunflower fields. The ground is covered in waist- to chest-high grass. Vegetation is very thick. The roads are elevated from the fields, and are usually bordered by walls, fences, or canals, which cross the landscape in all directions of the compass. Most groves are separated into 5- to 10-acre plots surrounded by walls or fences. The walls and fences provide good cover and make great obstacles, as do the canals. Most canal bridges will not support a tank's weight.

The towns and villages have narrow streets; more narrow than Europe. Electrical wires hang about 8 to 10 feet off the ground and cross each other in no particular pattern. Running an M1 tank through these areas is possible, but due to the amount of collateral damage, it would be unwise. Remember, we are restoring the Iraqi infrastructure, not destroying it. Most buildings are made of bricks and concrete, while others are made of adobe-style mud.

Key leaders (platoon sergeants and up) need to carry a couple of body bags and sets of rubber gloves. Initially, my battalion chain of command felt it was counterproductive to morale. What was actually counterproductive to morale was the pieces of human remains my soldiers had to pick up and place on a litter and cover with a blanket because nothing else was available. Remem-



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ber, not all casualties will be Americans. We are a civilized nation, and we recover the remains of our enemies and civilians as well.

Expect combat stress and have your chaplain and medics locate and tie into your servicing combat stress teams. Have the combat stress teams pay periodic visits to your soldiers. It will pay off in the long run. Let your soldiers know that the effect of combat stress makes you no less a man.

Think before you announce, "on the way" with a high-explosive antitank round. The NCFs will fire at you from or near occupied homes. Once the sun comes up, you will see several small children emerge from these homes. Imagine if you would have let go with your big gun. How many deaf children on the block did you create? How will this impact community relations? Use appropriate force. Yes, there are times to let loose the big bullets, and I am more willing to let one fly than most, but make sure it is an informed decision, and a price you are willing to pay.

A Trip Down Canal Road

The B Company, 3d Battalion, 67th Armor Regiment commander and I planned a simple night operation to engage and destroy a few NCFs along a specific narrow road where our elements were ambushed in the past. Our combined team consisted of two M1064 mortar tracks, two M1A2SEP tanks, three up-armored HMMWVs, and my M1025 scout HMMWV. The HMMWVs and personnel carriers were armed with .50 cal. We had two Kiowa Warrior helicopters from E Troop, 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry in support. Our battalion S2 and S3 joined our mission.

Our plan was to conduct a presence patrol through the town of Al Abbarah, and split into two separate groups of one tank, one M1064, and two HMMWVs to cover two additional villages along the Dyalia River Valley. Once we reached a designated point, we would turn around and head back the way we came and linkup for the trip through the hotspot near Al Abbarah. During the time when our forces were split, we had 2 kilometers between us.

Varying routes is a very important thing to do; however, in this particular area, there is only one bridge that can support the weight of tanks and we were restricted to using the same route in and out. The Kiowas provided route reconnaissance for our move into and out of the river valley, thus mitigating the tactical risk of using the same ingress and egress routes. Or so we thought.

The move in went on schedule, the tanks, personnel carriers, and HMMWVs rolling along smoothly while the Kiowas, who dropped to our company frequency, flew ahead observing anything unusual. We split from each other, turned around at the appropriate point, and linked back up on schedule. Negative contact. We held our move back through Al Abbarah for 15 minutes to allow the Kiowas to observe any NCFs attempting to set a trap for us on the way back through, thus allowing us to ambush those who were trying to ambush us. Easy 14 and Easy 16, the Kiowa pilots, spotted nothing through the thick canopy of date palms, and no activity along the roadways on either side of the canal. We started our move back, the Kiowas with us the entire way.



The ambush was initiated by seven 152mm artillery rounds hidden in the weeds on the shoulder of the roadway that paralleled the canal. They were daisy-chained together. The lead tank absorbed the bulk of the blast, shrapnel cutting through the main gun tube in several locations. The blast created a debris field of dust and asphalt, denser than any smoke screen I have ever seen. The truck in front of me stalled in the debris field. To my rear, one of my mortar tracks engulfed the narrow roadway. Then the small-arms fire started. We could not go forward or backward. We were in the kill zone, unable to move. Tracers flew over, under, in front of, and behind my truck. Every soldier in my truck returned fire. My supply clerk and .50-cal gunner laid down blistering fire, as the rest of us fired our M16s out the windows; aiming at the muzzle flashes from both sides of the road.

There is a time when training takes over your actions, and this was one of those times, which is why it is so important to train to standard all the time. I counted six separate muzzle flashes from the left side of the road, and four separate muzzle flashes from the right side of the road. With my magazine empty, I grabbed a fresh one and seated it firmly. An RPG flew over top. I shot at muzzle flashes until they stopped blinking. Then, as abruptly as it started, it stopped. The firefight lasted about 45 seconds: it was the longest 45 seconds of my life.

Grabbing the hand mike while yelling for a crew report, I learned that our S3 was wounded. I fed reports to the tactical operations center (TOC) while our team split into two separate columns. The wheels and the personnel carriers raced to the brigade aid station, and the tanks turned around at our rally point and moved in to secure the ambush site. Easy 14 and 16 responded to the ambush site with 14 rockets, once we were clear. I believe it was their rocket run that settled the hash of the NCFs for the remainder of the night.



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We discovered a small cache of hand grenades, RPG projectiles, and explosive materials. We pieced together the daisy-chained artillery rounds that initiated the ambush and the RPG launch that signaled break contact. We questioned the local populace and found them all to be very upset by the massive amounts of fire-

The tank commander on B22 knew something was wrong. His tank lost turret power, so he lost the thermal imagery and the commander's independent thermal viewer. Still, he did not hesitate to move back in and secure the ambush site. He requested artillery illumination to aid observation. I will never forget his words over the net when he was told his request was denied: "Illumination denied. I've lost turret power; I have my nods and my .50. Hooah. I will stay until relieved. White 2 out."

Our battalion quick reaction force relieved the crew on B22 a couple of hours later. The rest of the patrol drove back to our forward operating base. The B Company commander and I reported to the battalion TOC and debriefed the battle captain and the battlefield information center. I volunteered to take the battalion XO out to the ambush site at first light. We were fortunate to only suffer one casualty, as the following day we learned several things about the techniques used by our enemies.

We discovered only four of the seven daisy-chained artillery rounds detonated. God was with me — my truck was beside one of the rounds that did not explode. My scout platoon found detonation wire and traced it back along a wall between two fields, out of sight from the road. We found a stake and a screwdriver. The device was most likely fired by a car battery, and the screwdriver was used to complete the circuit. From the position of the individual who initiated the blast, he must have been in communication with a cohort who had direct observation of the roadway, because he was unable to observe the roadway from his position.

On the left side of the road, the NCFs used a cinderblock wall for cover, and the canal as an obstacle. From the right side of the road, they used climbing rigs (used for harvesting dates) to shimmy up palm trees and engage us with direct fire, using a wire fence and depression as an obstacle. Once return fire became too hot, they dropped from the trees and fled through the groves, which have a floor 8 to 10 feet lower than the roadbed. Our rounds passed harmlessly over their heads.

power displayed a few hours earlier, but claimed ignorance as to who planted the improvised explosive device (IED) and who was responsible for the ambush.

We learned a few days later that, shortly after we departed the area, a funeral was held. We were unable to determine how many had "died" the day or evening prior, or from what cause. A funeral may be for one or many. The local populace tends to keep to themselves; as during the Baath party rule, it was better to be ignorant of what your neighbor was doing for reasons of self-preservation.

One of our challenges is to teach the Iraqi people not to fear the truth of any situation. Thirty-five years of living under a ruthless dictator whose retributions were swift and terrible will take a long time to flush out.

Conclusively, I offer a few recommendations based on my limited experiences and observations. In no way does this apply to the whole of Iraq, as each area has its own particularities. Train — both physically and mentally — for what lies ahead. Learn tactics, techniques, and procedures during your upcoming leader recons. During transfer of authority, talk to those of us who are here, experiencing it now. Bring fresh ideas into the fight. Learn from us. We have knocked our unconventional enemies back on their heels, when it's your turn to jump into the ring, may you deliver the knockout blow.



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